

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: An Interest in Media-Related Fears and Anxieties

‘The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.’
(Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1933)

‘A world without fear would be a world without love.’
(Bourke, 2005: 391)

In 2002, the documentary filmmaker Michael Moore released *Bowling for Columbine*, a controversial depiction of gun violence in the United States, which, against the backdrop of the 1999 Columbine High School shootings, sought to explain the country’s unique fascination and affliction with guns. To an extent, *Bowling for Columbine* demystified the scapegoating of ‘violent’ movies, video games or ‘sadistic’ popular music, which had often been held responsible for violent acts in society. Yet the film still pointed a finger at the media as contributing to America’s gun problem. Although Moore avoided any firm conclusions, his investigation led him to suggest that the US media play a role in creating and sustaining a ‘culture of fear’ in which citizens feel an overpowering need to protect themselves from perceived threats. In particular, Moore takes issue with such reality television shows as *Cops*, which have tended to over-present crimes committed by the poor, predominantly by African-American or Hispanic males, thus seemingly skewing people’s perception of crime into an unrealistic or unfounded direction. This alleged creation of a ‘culture of fear’ was considered to play into the hands of those people and organisations that might profit from a fearful public, such as the weapon industry, security organisations, politicians, or media organisations themselves (Furedi, 2002; Glassner, 1999).

In March 2005, a series of ‘Marmite’ advertisements made it into the British headlines for all the wrong reasons. The adverts, reminiscent of a 1950s science-fiction thriller, showed a giant Marmite ‘blob’ rolling from supermarkets out into the streets, flattening anything that got in its way. People were depicted as variously

running away, screaming and petrified, or diving into the brown wobbly texture as though they were drawn in by alien forces. The slogans read 'Indescribable – Indestructible – Great on Cheese Sandwiches'¹ and 'You either love it or you hate it!'. Despite having been described elsewhere as only 'mild' and clearly 'comical' horror, the advert was banned on all children's programming by the ASA (Advertising Standards Agency), in response to complaints from concerned parents whose 2- to 3-year-olds had been left 'terrified' and suffering nightmares.² In the same year, a new version of *Doctor Who* hit the television screens in the UK. With it came (celebrity) viewers' 1960s childhood anecdotes about watching the original time lord, and 'hiding behind the sofa' whenever the Daleks appeared. As much as the key emphasis on *Doctor Who's* scare potential continued to generate welcome publicity for the BBC, the channel also had to consider its responsibilities as public broadcaster in making sure that young viewers were not 'distressed' by what they saw. A win-win solution was to create an online device to 'forecast' the 'fear factor' of individual episodes. Judged by a family of six (parents and four young children), each episode was given scare potential on a scale from 1 to 5 (mildly scary, quite scary, very scary, chilling, or terrifying), with an eventual inclusion of 5.5 and 6 for 'off-the-scale' and 'beyond fear'. If the panel judged episodes to be terrifying or worse, parents were advised to watch with their children or record episodes for daytime viewing, that is, for 'a long time before bedtime'.³

Studying the relationship between fear and the media is a delicate and complex matter. Arguably, the above illustrations alone imply a multitude of different kinds of 'fear' or interconnections between 'fear' and the media. Most fears are conceived as the *results* of media encounters, such as the general suspicion or anxiety which particular media representations of the world are seen to generate in 'unsuspecting' viewers, a suspicion of fellow human beings, for instance, which can have powerful political implications. The frightful responses to *Doctor Who* and the 'blob' are considered media-induced, too, though they imply two particular forms of fear: fear as pleasure and fear as distress (like Marmite, you either love it or you hate it!). Such responses do not only differ in valence but also in intensity, as the

scale of 1 to 5 (or beyond) suggests. Further, the above examples contain media representations of fear itself, as in the depiction of terror in characters fleeing from the Marmite blob. And finally, there are the 'fears' or concerns parents and critics have for children, or society as a whole, fears about adverse responses to the screen, either in terms of anxious perceptions or lingering feelings of dread.

In a sense, this thesis is about all of those fears. Its main purpose, however, is to explore the relationships between 'fear' and the media from the perspective of the audience. Instead of pre-conceptualising media-related emotions and, by implication, favouring a reading of 'cause and effect', this study seeks to investigate the different meanings and significances viewers attach to their fearful engagement with film and television. It seeks an understanding of what goes on when viewers speak about their affective relations to the media, the issues they make relevant, and the wider functions and consequences they assign to their encounters. Crucially, this study investigates how participants make sense of these experiences and what notions of 'fear' they deal with in doing so. Fear is thus approached both as a socio-cultural concept and as a 'lived' experience, bearing in mind that, as Michael Pickering has argued, 'experience always involves interpretation of what happens in life, of what makes our perceptions, feelings, and actions meaningful' (Pickering, 2008: 19).

In order to explore the media/fear/audience triangle, this thesis focuses on qualitative material gathered from nine three-generational families (grandparents, parents and teenagers) in Germany and the UK. Over the course of one (UK) and six (Germany) month(s), family members kept viewing diaries, in which they noted any feelings of fear or anxiety they had when watching a particular film or programme. They reported what the experience felt like, what it was that made them feel this way, whether they enjoyed it or disliked the experience, and whether there was any media material they consciously avoided because it may have bothered them. Along with short open-ended questionnaires about general viewing preferences and participants' sense of their emotional lives, these viewing diaries then formed the

basis for semi-structured interviews. The study's findings derive from discursive and thematic analyses of the interview material in particular.

As should have become evident from the above emphasis on 'meaning' and 'sense-making', this thesis has been chiefly influenced by audience research from a broad media and cultural studies perspective. It aligns itself with what is commonly known as 'audience reception research', an 'interdisciplinary area between the humanities and the social sciences' (Schröder et al., 2003: 124), which puts emphasis on meaning-making as a complex two-way interaction between historically situated audiences and polysemic media texts.⁴ Its beginnings can be traced back to the late 1970s/early 1980s and to what was then (optimistically) termed an 'ethnographic turn' within cultural studies (see Moores, 1993). Although these early pieces of research were not always ethnographic in the true sense of the word (i.e. involving participant observation over lengthy periods of time), they shared with ethnography the objective for participant-led, interpretive and reflexive modes of investigation. Instead of relying on textual analyses, theoretical notions of implied readers or spectators, survey-based research or experimental studies, proponents of qualitative audience research began to speak (or write) to people, asking for, and then exploring, their interpretations and everyday uses of the media. Key early studies in this area included David Morley's *The Nationwide Audience* (1980), Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1983), and Ien Ang's *Watching Dallas* (1985).

Things have changed since these early days. Although reception studies thrived and developed throughout the 1990s, the concepts of 'audience' and 'reception' have more recently been problematised in the light of new media arrivals and new modes of media engagement, such as the ones offered by Web 2.0. Critics have argued that audiences are no longer only at the 'receiving' end of mass-mediated messages; they have become users, participants and producers in a multi-mediated environment (see Livingstone, 2004; Gauntlett, 2007). As such, they are not only considered 'active' but almost 'hyperactive' in their agency.⁵ For optimists, such developments constitute signs of a growing decentralisation and democratisation of the media.

Yet, others remain sceptical in their assessment of the situation, or at least towards the dismissal of terms like the 'audience' (see, e.g., Ruddock, 2008). There may be new modes of media engagement, but these are neither embraced unequivocally by all, nor has their arrival eradicated more traditional forms of entertainment. This study acknowledges change, but it does so with some caveats. One of them is to hold on to 'audiences', partly for lack of a better term (!), partly for the reason that, as Ruddock points out in his study on youth's assessment of Britain's binge-drinking culture, audiences still often see themselves *as* audiences (ibid).⁶ Further, while viewing habits may have changed, and will continue to alter in the light of digital television and media convergence, people still go to the cinema, and they still, by and large, sit in front of their TV (and DVD) sets, or else, opt for downloading their favourite programmes online (see, e.g., Evans, 2008).

Perhaps, the 'ordinariness' of viewing is moving into the background because it is not as 'loud' as more creative forms of media engagement. What I think is more important than quarrelling about terminology is to explore audiences' sense of themselves and the world around them in the context of their gradual adaptation to these changes. In addition, whereas early audience studies largely focused on individual texts and the more or less direct interaction between a text's presumed, 'encoded' meaning (or ideology) and the viewer's ability to 'decode' it (Hall, 1980; see Chapter Two), this study contributes to the growing body of work which sees individual texts as embedded in wider mediated and extra-textual contexts (see, e.g., Barker et al., 2008). Neither texts nor audiences exist in a vacuum. Audiences come equipped with experiences, knowledges and expectations of and towards media material (compare Barker et al.'s film 'viewing strategies', 2001: 158ff), and texts exist in relation to (viewers' understandings of) television schedules, cinema auditoriums, production processes and the nature and function of other media material. As such, while this project focuses on one strand of activity within our multi-mediated environment, that is, on viewers' responses to film and television, it considers these within wider contexts and, as and when participants made them relevant, in relation to other forms of media as well.

This thesis consists of two overall sections. Chapters Two, Three and Four provide the theoretical and methodological background to the project; the subsequent three chapters focus on the analysis of the qualitative research material. In particular, Chapter Two situates the thesis amongst some of the dominant theories and traditions of studies into fear and the media, broadly distinguishing between research on viewers' wider fearful perceptions of the world and the domain of direct emotional responses to the screen. Beginning with a detailed critique of Gerbner et al.'s Cultural Indicators project (particularly its Cultivation Analysis), I discuss the relevance of contemporary 'culture of fear' discourses, as well as the significance of recent conceptual changes in the 'fear of crime' literature. In addition, I will focus on largely theoretical claims about responses to the horror film, which constitutes a case study in outlining dominant thought and research on 'fright' responses within film studies, particularly from psychoanalytic and cognitivist perspectives. The chapter takes issue with previous over-simplifications of both the concept of 'fear' and that of audience/text interrelations, whilst also introducing some of the difficulties of studying viewers' emotional responses to the screen. The chapter concludes with a discussion of David Buckingham's *Moving Images* (1996) as a useful approach to the topic from a broad media and cultural studies perspective.

Chapter Three provides some of the theoretical framework for this study by exploring the potential and limitations of studying 'emotions' through language. The chapter begins with an overview of a range of questions and definitions which have shaped emotion research across disciplines, including psychology, biology and sociology. Two approaches to emotion talk will then be discussed in some detail, Discursive Psychology and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. The chapter outlines their strengths and weaknesses and constructs a case for a selective combination of their theories and methods for the purposes of this project.

A practical account of the research process, including reflections upon its scope and significance, constitutes Chapter Four. Here, I outline the aims and objectives of the project and clarify the decisions and circumstances which shaped the research design, the recruitment, and the gathering of qualitative material. The

focus on three generations in two countries is explained and justified, and the analytic process discussed in the light of one British interview example, which also forms the basis of the first analytic chapter.

Chapter Five, then, contains a detailed analysis of the aforementioned British and one German interview, both conducted with parent viewers. The chapter serves to introduce some of the topics and complexities in participants' talk, which are subsequently explored in reference to the remaining corpus of material. It is based on two analytic tools (interview portraits and tables) but centres on close discursive investigations of individual stretches of talk. In particular, the chapter highlights the distinction between personal and more 'borrowed' discourses of media/fear relations, as well as between reflexive and reflective kinds of talk.

Chapter Six opens up the research focus to a consideration of the remaining participant interviews. It splits responses into scary 'pleasures' and 'displeasures' (Hills, 2003), depending on how they featured in viewers' talk. The chapter serves as an overview of the kinds of fears participants made relevant in diaries and conversations, and it ends with a closer look at some of the national and generational 'traces' (Götz et al., 2005) which could be identified in the material. In particular, the chapter demonstrates that media-related 'fear' comes attached with a variety of experiential and socio-cultural meanings, and that viewers understand their responses in relation to their sense of self and others, as well as their overall theories of the media.

The final analytic chapter, Chapter Seven, centres on one particularly salient topic in participants' talk, that is, the issue of 'reality'. Starting with a consideration of existing literature on modality judgements, the chapter outlines the different ways in which participants related media encounters to real life, as well as the emotional consequences such processes entailed. While existing criteria of modality judgements are evidenced in the research material, the analysis also reveals some additional 'reality' factors. Importantly, the 'symbolic' properties of the media emerge as significant beyond a mere focus on 'media violence' (cf. Chapter Two).

The thesis concludes with a summary of overall observations, reflections on key findings, and suggestions for future research in the field. In particular, the material discussed in this study suggests that media-related fears are manifold and contain experiential and consequential differences. Importantly, they have to be understood in relation to viewers' sense of life history, their theories of the media, and their understanding of themselves as emotional beings. Participants in this study inhabited different viewing positions as members of physical and/or 'imagined' audiences, which impacted on their interpretive stances towards a range of media material. As a result, 'fear' emerged as a fluid and complex concept, and one which contained both personal and social dimensions. These findings directly challenge the assumptions which underlie Cultivation Analysis and related studies on 'fear cultures', particularly as regards the centrality of the media text (including its representations of violence), the determinism of socio-demographic variables, and the model of 'fear' as singular, negative, cumulative, and intensely privatised.

¹ *The Blob*'s 1958 cinema posters read 'Indescribable – Indestructible – Nothing Can Stop It'.

² BBC News Website, 16.03.2005, 'Marmite ads "terrified" children', available online at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/uk/4353055.stm> (last accessed 24 September 2008).

³ BBC *Doctor Who* Website, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/doctorwho/episodes/fearforecast.shtml> (last accessed 24 September 2008). In fact, none of the 2005-2007 episodes are ever just judged as 1/5, which means the scale really starts at 2/5.

⁴ In this study, I generally employ the expression 'qualitative audience research' instead of 'reception' studies, as I see the latter reserved for the kind of historical materialist approach within film studies which examines the different discourses surrounding specific movies by investigating their *critical* reception (see, e.g., its chief proponent, Janet Staiger, 1992; 2000).

⁵ See Karpovich (2007) for a related notion of 'hyperactivity' with regard to online fandom.

⁶ Ruddock also points out, in reference to the *Nationwide* project, that 'the audience question has always been about participation, not reception in and of itself' (2008: 3).